Modern Literary Criticism

Stanley Edgar Hyman
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I ITS NATURE

The literary criticism written in English over the past quarter of a century is qualitatively different from any previous criticism. Whether you call it the “new” criticism, as many have, or “scientific criticism,” or “working criticism,” or “modern criticism,” its only relation to the great criticism of the past seems to be one of descent. Its practitioners are not more brilliant or alert to literature than their predecessors, in fact they are clearly less so than giants like Aristotle and Coleridge, but they are doing something radically different with literature, and they are getting something radically different from literature in return. What modern criticism is could be defined crudely and somewhat inaccurately as: the organized use of non-literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature. The tools are these methods or “techniques,” the nuggets are “insights,” the occupation is mining, digging, or just plain grubbing. The non-literary bodies of knowledge range from the ritual patterns of savages to the nature of capitalist society. And all of these result in a kind of close reading and detailed attention to the text that can only be understood on the analogy of microscopic analysis.

The key word of this definition is “organized.” Traditional criticism used most of these techniques and disciplines, but in a spasmodic and haphazard fashion. The relevant sciences were not developed enough to be used methodically, and not informed enough to have much to contribute. The bodies of knowledge of most usefulness to criticism are the social sciences, which study man functioning in the group (since literature is, after all, one of man’s social functions) rather

1 This essay is the author’s Introduction to a study of the methods of modern literary criticism, *The Armed Vision*, a volume to be published this year by Alfred A. Knopf.
than the physical or biological sciences (since literature is not a function of the human structure in the sense that walking or eating is, but a part of the cultural or societal accretion). Although Aristotle clearly aimed to turn what we now call the social sciences on drama and poetry, to study them in terms of what he knew of the human mind, the nature of society, and primitive survivals, he had few data to apply beyond his own empiric observations, brilliant as they are, and unverified traditions. The miracle Aristotle performed, the essential rightness of his criticism based almost entirely on private observation and keen sensibility, is a triumph of critical insight hitting largely by intuition on a good deal later discovered and developed. Even by Coleridge’s time, two thousand years later, not much more was known accurately about the nature of the human mind and society than Aristotle knew.

A good deal of criticism, of course, is contemporary without being modern in the sense defined above, that is, it makes no organized critical use of any of this material (it is surprising, however, how much unconscious use it makes). Although such criticism has a place, and frequently an important one, it is by definition another kind of thing, and not our concern here. At the same time, besides its special functions or the special degree to which it does things done only haphazardly and informally before, modern criticism does a number of things that criticism has always done: interpreting the work, relating it to a literary tradition, evaluating it, etc. These are relatively permanent features of any criticism (evaluation, we might note, has largely atrophied in the serious criticism of our time), but even where a modern critic tends to specialize in one of these more traditional functions, he does so along with other less traditional things, or in a fashion profoundly modified by these characteristic developments of the modern mind.

John Crowe Ransom, who has been chiefly influential in popularizing the term “the new criticism” with his book of that name, insisting on its qualitative difference from earlier criticism (on the basis of the modern detailed reading in “the structural properties of poetry”) has claimed that ours is an age of more than usual critical distinction, and that in depth and precision contemporary critical writing is “beyond all earlier criticism in our language.” There is, I think, little doubt of this, but we cannot flatter ourselves that the superiority lies in the calibre of our critics as opposed to their predecessors. Clearly, it lies in their methods. Modern criticism has vast organized bodies of knowledge about human behavior at its disposal, and new and fruitful
techniques in its bag of tricks. To the extent that some of this can be consolidated, and the "erratic, sometimes unbalanced and incomplete, if brilliant, work of a number of isolated critics co-ordinated and integrated, vistas for the immediate future of criticism should be even greater, and a body of serious literary analysis turned out in English of a quality to distinguish our age.

Among the methods and disciplines that have been established as useful for literary criticism, the social sciences come to mind first, a reservoir so vast that it has hardly yet been tapped. From psychoanalysis critics have borrowed the basic assumptions of the operations of the subconscious mind, demonstrating its deeper "wishes" through associations and "clusters" of images; the basic mechanisms of dream-distortion, such as condensation, displacement, and splitting, which are also the basic mechanisms of poetic-formation; the Jungian concept of Archetypes, and much else. They have taken the concept of "configurations" from the Gestaltists; basic experimental data about animal and child behavior from the laboratory psychologists; information about the pathological expressions of the human mind from the clinical psychologists; discoveries about the behavior of man in groups and social patterns from the social psychologists; and a great deal more, from Jaensch's "eidetic images" and similar purely subjective material to the most objective physical and chemical data reported by neurological and endocrinological psychologies. From competing sociologies criticism has borrowed theories and data regarding the nature of society, social change, and social conflicts, and their relation to literature and other cultural phenomena; and from anthropological schools, theories and data regarding primitive and savage societies and social behavior, from the sweeping evolutionary generalizations of theorists like Tylor to the meticulously observed detail of the Boas school. An offshoot of anthropology, the field of folklore has also been of particular fruitfulness to criticism as a source of information about the traditional popular rituals, tales, and beliefs that underlie the patterns and themes of both folk art and sophisticated art.

In addition to the social sciences, a number of other modern disciplines have been very fruitful or are potentially so. Literary scholarship, although hardly a new field, has by our century accumulated so great a body of accurate information and so exact a body of procedures, that with the addition of critical imagination it has been made to produce a type of scholarly criticism completely "modern" in the sense used
above. The traditional scholarly areas of linguistics and philology, with the addition of the modern field of semantics, have opened up to criticism enormous vistas, only slightly explored. The physical and biological sciences have provided criticism with such basic ingredients as the experimental method itself, as well as theories of great metaphoric usefulness, like "evolution" and modern physical "relativity," "field," and "indeterminacy" concepts. Philosophy, although traditionally concerned with literature only in the guise of aesthetics, has proved of use to criticism, particularly in ethical and metaphysical formulations with which it can confront questions of ultimate value and belief; and a number of critics have even turned the doctrines and insights of religion and mysticism on literature. Besides these bodies of theory and knowledge, modern criticism has developed a number of specialized procedures of its own and methodized them, sometimes on the analogy of scientific procedure. Such are the pursuit of biographical information, the exploration of ambiguities, the study of symbolic action and communication in literary works, and close reading, hard work, and detailed exploration of texts in general.

For the most part these new critical techniques and lines of investigation depend on a small number of assumptions that are basic to the modern mind and characteristic of it, assumptions that are principally the contributions of four great nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers—Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud. A few of those key assumptions, relatively new to literary criticism in our century, can be noted here at random, with the reservation that probably no single modern critic would accept them all. From Darwin, the view of literature as an evolutionary development, within the work of a single author and in larger patterns outside him, changing and developing (although not necessarily "improving") in orderly sequence. From Marx, the concept of literature as reflecting, in however complex and indirect a fashion, the social patterns and conflicts of its time. From Freud, the concept of literature as the disguised expression and fulfillment of repressed wishes, or the analogy of dreams, with these disguises operating in accord with known principles; and underlying that, the even more basic assumptions of mental levels beneath consciousness and some conflict between an expressive and a censorship principle. From Frazer, the view of primitive magic, myth, and ritual underlying the most transcendent literary patterns and themes. Other basic assumptions would include Dewey's doctrine of "continuity," the view that the read-
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ing and writing of literature is a form of human activity comparable to any other, answerable to the same laws and capable of being studied by the same objective procedures; the behaviorist addition that literature is in fact a man writing and a man reading, or it is nothing; and the rationalist view that literature is ultimately analyzable. Negatively, modern criticism is equally distinguished by the absence of the two principal assumptions about literature in the past, that it is essentially a type of moral instruction and that it is essentially a type of entertainment or amusement.

Operating on these assumptions, modern criticism asks a number of questions that have, for the most part, not been asked of literature before. What is the significance of the work in relation to the artist's life, his childhood, his family, his deepest needs and desires? What is its relation to his social group, his class, his economic livelihood, the larger pattern of his society? What precisely does it do for him, and how? What does it do for the reader, and how? What is the connection between those two functions? What is the relation of the work to the archetypal primitive patterns of ritual, to the inherited corpus of literature, to the philosophic world views of its time and of all time? What is the organization of its images, its diction, its larger formal pattern? What are the ambiguous possibilities of its key words, and how much of its content consists of meaningful and provable statements? Finally, then, modern criticism can get to the older questions: what are the work's intentions, how valid are they, and how completely are they fulfilled; what are its meanings (plural rather than singular); and how good or bad is it and why?

All of these, obviously, are questions asked about literature, either in general or of a specific work. Nevertheless, modern criticism for the most part no longer accepts its traditional status as an adjunct to "creative" or "imaginative" literature. If we define art as the creation of meaningful patterns of experience, or the manipulation of human experience into meaningful patterns, a definition that would probably get some degree of general acceptance, it is obvious that both imaginative and critical writing are art as defined. Imaginative literature organizes its experiences out of life at first hand (in most cases); criticism organizes its experiences out of imaginative literature, life at second hand or once-removed. Both are, if you wish, kinds of poetry, and one is precisely as independent as the other, or as dependent. "No exponent of criticism . . . has, I presume, ever made the preposterous assumption
that criticism is an autotelic art," T. S. Eliot wrote in 1923, in "The Function of Criticism." Whether or not anyone had made that "preposterous assumption" by 1923, modern criticism, which began more or less formally the following year with the publication of I. A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism*, has been acting on it since.

As R. P. Blackmur has pointed out, however, criticism "is a self-sufficient but by no means an isolated art," and in actual practice modern criticism has been at once completely autotelic and inextricably tied to poetry. That is, like any criticism, it guides, nourishes, and lives off art, and is thus, from another point of view, a handmaiden to art, parasitic at worst and symbiotic at best. The critic requires works of art for his raw material, subject, and theme, and in return for them performs such invaluable secondary functions on occasion as helping the reader understand and appreciate works of art; helping the artist understand and evaluate his own work; and helping the general progress and development of art by popularizing, "placing," and providing standards. The critic also, in special cases, calls up a generation of poets, as Emerson or the early Van Wyck Brooks did; assigns subjects for writers as Gorky or Bernard DeVoto do; changes the course of art or attempts to, with Tolstoy and the moralists in the latter category, and Boileau and perhaps the Romantic critics in England in the former; or even furnishes the artist (sometimes himself) with specific themes, techniques, and usable formulations, as do a number of contemporary critics of poetry.

In one direction, literary criticism is bounded by reviewing, in the other, by aesthetics. The reviewer, more or less, is interested in books as commodities; the critics in books as literature, or, in modern terms, as literary action or behavior; the aesthetician in literature in the abstract, not in specific books at all. These are thus functional rather than formal categories, and they are constantly shifting, so that the reviewer who ignores the commodity aspects of the book under discussion to treat of its significance as a work of literature becomes, for that review at least, a critic; the critic who generalizes about the abstract nature of Art or the Beautiful becomes, temporarily, an aesthetician; and the aesthetician who criticizes specific works of literature in terms of their unique properties is at that time a critic. One of the most remarkable features of our time is the number of ostensible critics, like Henry Seidel Canby or the brothers Van Doren, who on examination turn out to be disguised reviewers.

Another feature of contemporary criticism worth remarking is that
each critic tends to have a master metaphor or series of metaphors, in terms of which he sees the critical function, and that this metaphor then shapes, informs, and sometimes limits his work. Thus for R. P. Blackmur the critic is a mechanic with a flashlight, turning light on the internal workings of a beautiful piece of machinery; for George Santayana he is a wine-bibber; for Constance Rourke he is a manure-spreader, fertilizing the ground for a good crop; for Waldo Frank he is an obstetrician, bringing new life to birth; for Kenneth Burke, after a number of other images, he has emerged as a wealthy impresario, staging dramatic performances of any work that catches his fancy; for Ezra Pound he is a patient man showing a friend through his library, and so forth.

The methods and techniques of modern criticism noted above filter through these master metaphors, and also filter through something even more intangible, the critic's personal apparatus of intelligence, knowledge, skill, sensibility, and ability to write. No method, however ingenious, is foolproof, and almost every technique of modern criticism is used brilliantly by brilliant critics, and poorly by stupid, ignorant, incompetent or dull ones. On the other hand, a good man possessed of the critic's virtues may operate well or brilliantly, today as at any time, with no method but the application of his own intelligence and sensibility. He would not be a modern critic in our sense of the term, however, and is not our concern here. Any critic, no matter what his method, needs the intelligence to adapt it specifically to the work with which he is dealing; the knowledge, both literary and otherwise, to be aware of the implications of what he is doing; the skill to keep from being picked up and carried away by his method to one or another barren and mechanical monism; the sensibility to remain constantly aware of the special values of the work he is criticizing as a unique aesthetic experience; and the literary ability to express what he has to say. There is no test for these personal characteristics. Even Shakespeare, the traditional touchstone, is not much help: the two men who have most distinguished themselves in contemporary criticism by disrespect for Shakespeare have been Waldo Frank, a professional exhorter to piety only slightly concerned with literature of any sort, and John Crowe Ransom, one of the subtlest and most acute critical minds of our day. In the last analysis, these personal capacities are incalculable, and in a discussion of critical method objectified and abstracted from the living critic they can only be presumed or, more honestly, prayed for.
One of the principal implications of modern criticism is its development toward a science. In the foreseeable future, literary criticism will not become a science (we may be either resigned to this or grateful for it), but increasingly we can expect it to move in a scientific direction; that is, toward a formal methodology and system of procedures that can be objectively transmitted. As an experiment can be copied and checked from the report, at any time and place by anyone capable of the necessary manipulations, so will critical procedures be capable of repetition by anyone with the requisite interest and ability. The private sensibility is unique with the critic and dies with him; his methods will increasingly be capable of objective transmission. The reproducer, it goes without saying, will need a sensibility and other qualifications roughly comparable to the originator’s, in a sense that has not been true of physical science since the beginnings of the experimental method. (That is, a fool and a boor, granted elementary competence, will get the same results by repeating Boyle’s experiments that Boyle did.) Furthermore, no matter to what extent the method of critical analysis becomes a body of objective procedures, with the words “evaluation” or “appreciation” the critic will always be entering a purely subjective area: whether the good man’s reasonable superstructure built on objective analysis or the bad man’s indefensible whim or whimsy.

The other principal implication of modern criticism is its development in the direction of a democratic criticism, Edmund Burke’s hopeful doctrine of “every man his own critic.” Burke writes in his essay on The Sublime and Beautiful:

The true standard of the arts is in every man’s power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things, in nature will give the truest lights, where the greatest sagacity and industry that slights such observation must leave us in the dark, or, what is worse, amuse and mislead us by false lights.

This is, piously, the view that the unaided powers of any man make him a critic. The directly contrary view is Francis Bacon’s in Novum Organum, that the adoption of his method would equalize all minds, as a compass or a rule equalizes all hands. Somewhere between the two lie the democratic possibilities for modern criticism: by extending method, more men can be capable critics, in most cases not professionally, but in their private reading and their lives. And the vested interests that possibility menaces are much bigger game than the priesthood of literary criticism.
Modern literary criticism, we might say, begins with Plato, and is continued and extended by Aristotle. Actually, of course, they were its great forerunners, anticipating, as they anticipated so many things, much of contemporary critical practice. Plato turned his dialectical philosophic method, as expounded in Books V and VII of The Republic, on poetry, as well as psychological and social assumptions about its origin and functions. If his conclusion was to reject it philosophically as too far removed from the true Platonic reality, and socio-psychologically as harmful to the good society, his method was nevertheless the modern method of bringing to bear on it all the organized knowledge he had. In Aristotle's case, there has been a recent effort, by the neo-Aristotelian school of criticism at the University of Chicago, to insist that he applied no deductive knowledge or principles whatsoever to poetry, but merely examined poems inductively as formal organizations unique in themselves. This view has been demolished by, among others, John Crowe Ransom (in "The Bases of Criticism" in The Sewanee Review, Autumn, 1944) and Kenneth Burke (in "The Problem of the Intrinsic" reprinted as an appendix to A Grammar of Motives). Burke in addition demonstrating that not only was Aristotle thoroughly "Platonic" in his practice, but that so are the neo-Aristotelians, surreptitiously, precisely at their most successful. It takes no more than a reading of the Poetics to establish that, although Aristotle worked as inductively and close to the specific text as the neo-Aristotelians would have him, at the same time he continued much of Plato's approach, deepening Plato's charge of mimesis or imitation to give poetry philosophic validity, and substituting a sounder socio-psychological concept, catharsis, for Plato's inadequate concept of poetic function as harmful stimulation of the passions. In addition to analyzing poetry by means of these remarkably explicit philosophic, social, and psychological a priori assumptions, Aristotle also turned on it an embryonic anthropology, traditions of the primitive origins of Greek drama, that has turned out to be surprisingly accurate to later anthropological, archaeological, and philological research (despite such inevitable flaws as his concept of the Choric song as a mere "embellishment" to tragedy). Aristotle thus anticipated the chief features and techniques of the literary criticism we have come to call "modern."
Later classical and medieval critics continued one or another of these modern strains, from Aristarchus and the scholiasts in the second century before Christ, writing an embryonic social criticism, to Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in the fourteenth century, furnishing allegorical interpretations of literature very close to what we would now call "symbolic" readings. The modern environmental criticism of literature began with Vico's *La Scienza Nuova* in 1725, which includes a social and psychological interpretation of Homer; it developed more fully (apparently independently of Vico) in Montesquieu's work, particularly *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748. After this Italian and French origin, the movement spread principally in Germany through the latter half of the eighteenth century, shifting its focus from history and law to literature and art. In the work of Winckelmann, Lessing, and Herder, it became an aspect of burgeoning German nationalism. Winckelmann began it in 1764 with his *History of Ancient Art*, which studies Greek plastic art in terms of its political, social, and philosophic background; Lessing continued it, principally in his *Laocoön* two years later, with particular emphasis on the relativity of forms in historical usage and the importance of Aristotle's principles; Herder developed the environmentalist approach still further, increasing the method's relativism by opposing folk art and Gothic to the Classic-worship of Winckelmann and Lessing, extending Vico's dynamic historical concepts in his own *Philosophy of History* and emphasizing a comparative method in all the fields he touched (making him the ancestor of our modern fields of comparative philology, comparative religion and mythology, and comparative literary study).

All of this flowered in the next century in the work of the first really great modern critic, Coleridge, in England, and in a substantial school in France. The *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, is almost the bible of modern criticism, and contemporary critics have tended to see it, with Arthur Symons, as "the greatest book of criticism in English," and with Herbert Read as "the most considerable." On its first page it announces the manifesto for modern criticism: the application of Coleridge's political, philosophic (including the psychological), and religious principles to poetry and criticism. The *Biographia* was thus a century in advance of its time, and only the inadequacy of the knowledge available to him kept Coleridge from founding modern criticism then and there. He is, however, with the exception of Aristotle, certainly its most important progenitor. His work found no one
to carry it on, unfortunately, and when the doctrines of environmentalist criticism reappeared in England, in H. T. Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* in 1857, they were derived not from Coleridge but from his German predecessors and his French successors.

Meanwhile, the German doctrine of literature as an expression of society was brought to France by Madame de Staël in *Literature in Relation to Social Institutions* (1800), which was responsible in part for such diverse progeny as the rationalist history of Guizot, the populist history of Michelet, and the sceptical history of Renan, as well as by the biographical literary criticism of Sainte-Beuve and the sociological literary criticism of Taine. Sainte-Beuve was the point at which the whole earlier tradition split in two. On the one hand, he saw criticism as a social science, "the natural history of literature," with a methodical procedure that studies the author, in the words of MacClintock in *Sainte-Beuve's Critical Theory*, in relation to "his race, his native country, his epoch, his family, his education and early environment, his group of associates, his first success, his first moment of disintegration, his peculiarities of body and mind, especially his weaknesses," and much else. This is the tradition that continues in Taine, Brandes, Brunetière, etc. On the other hand, Sainte-Beuve insists, in his criticism of Taine, in "M. Taine's History of English Literature," that the critic must also "continue to respect and inhale the scent of that sober, delicately-perfumed flower which is Pope's, Boileau's, Fontane's." This second tradition has been continued in the line through Arnold, Babitt, and Eliot, equally indebted to him. Sainte-Beuve defines the combination of the two schools as the formula for the perfect critic, but admits that the hope of this reconciliation in one man is "an impossibility," "a dream." So it has proved to be for most of a century, at least, although in our time we might express the same hope with somewhat more reason.

Taine himself claimed the historical imagination of Lessing and Michelet as part of his ancestry, and in the incidental literary analyses in the latter's *History of France*, some of them sharp class-anglings (like the reading of *Manon Lescaut* as an expression of the small landed gentry before the Revolution), the resemblance to Taine is obviously more than a matter of historical imagination. At the same time, Taine's three principal criteria for criticism — *race, moment, milieu* — had all been anticipated by Sainte-Beuve, who got them from Hegel's *Zeit, Volke, Umgebung*, which were in turn derived from Herder. Taine
thus brought to a focus most of the earlier tendencies toward a scientific criticism, and his work logically enough became the target for all attacks on these tendencies. The Goncourts, for example, wrote very superciliously on meeting him, "This was Taine, the incarnation in flesh and blood of modern criticism, a criticism at once very learned, very ingenious, and very often erroneous beyond imagining." Perhaps the sharpest and most perceptive recognition of his weaknesses and the weaknesses of a good deal of modern criticism, more perceptive than Sainte-Beuve's strictures, came from Flaubert, who wrote in one of his letters, on the History of English Literature:

There is something else in art beside the milieu in which it is practiced and the physiological antecedents of the worker. On this system you can explain the series, the group, but never the individuality, the special fact that makes him this person and not another. This method results inevitably in leaving talent out of consideration. The masterpiece has no longer any significance except as an historical document. It is the old critical method of La Harpe exactly turned around. People used to believe that literature was an altogether personal thing and that books fell out of the sky like meteors. Today they deny that the will and the absolute have any reality at all. The truth, I believe, lies between the two extremes.

In 1869, Flaubert wrote to George Sand on the subject of critics: "At the time of La Harpe they were grammarians; at the time of Sainte-Beuve and Taine they were historians. When will they be really artists?" It was a question not to be answered for half a century.

The next major development in modern criticism came in 1912 and the years immediately following. That year Jane Ellen Harrison, a professor of Greek studies at Newnham College, Cambridge, published Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion. The book includes "An Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy" by Gilbert Murray, to whom the book is dedicated, and "A Chapter on the Origin of the Olympic Games" by F. M. Cornford, one of Miss Harrison's colleagues at Cambridge. Although most of it is Miss Harrison's independent work, Themis thus constituted a kind of collective manifesto of what is known as the Cambridge school of Classical scholarship, which completely revolutionized the study of Greek art and thought by turning on it the anthropological knowledge and theories of Sir James G. Frazer and his followers. In fairness to indignant Oxonians, it should be pointed out that Oxford scholars, among them Murray and Andrew Lang, had sketched out the techniques for applying not
Miss Harrison had published before, the latter in fact for more than a quarter of a century, but *Themis* is the first full statement of their ritual view of origins and the first really detailed application of anthropology to the analysis of literature, here the Greek drama. Since in addition to printing and using Murray and Cornford, Miss Harrison drew heavily on unpublished work by another colleague, A. B. Cook, and by others, it also constitutes a genuinely collective production by the group. Shortly afterwards, the same year, Cornford published *From Religion to Philosophy*, a similar anthropological tracing of the ritual origins of Greek philosophic thought. In 1913, Murray published *Euripides and His Age*, a study of Euripides and his drama against the background of the ritual origin of tragedy, and Miss Harrison published *Ancient Art and Ritual*. The following year, Cornford published *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, which analyzed Greek comedy in the same terms, and Cook published *Zeus*, an application of anthropological material to still another area. Finally, in 1920, Miss Jessie Weston tried the method, of the Cambridge school, with great success, on non-Greek material in her *From Ritual to Romance*; an anthropological exploration of the origins of the Grail Romances in ritual terms.

Although these books are, for all practical purposes, modern literary criticism, as the work of scholars writing in fairly specialized fields they failed to attract the attention of literary men sufficiently to inaugurate the new movement. In America in 1919, Conrad Aiken turned Freudian and other psychologies on poetry in *Scepticisms*, and clearly formulated the basic assumption of modern criticism, that poetry is "a natural, organic product, with discoverable functions, clearly open to analysis." Like the Cambridge group, however, he lacked the literary influence to set criticism following out his assumption. It remained for I. A. Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* in 1924 to constitute the formal beginnings of modern criticism with a variant of the same statement; that aesthetic experiences are "not in the least a new and different kind of thing" from other human experiences, and can be studied in the same fashion. It was, as we have noted, no new doctrine (not only had Aiken specifically anticipated it five years before, but only Frazer's disreputable Cantabrigian anthropology, but Sir E. B. Tylor's authentic Oxonian anthropology, to literature as early as 1907, in the symposium *Anthropology and the Classics*, edited by R. R. Marett, and that Murray had published *The Rise of the Greek Epic* the same year.

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3 1912 was a watershed year for more than this. It also saw the publication of F. C. Prescott's "Poetry and Dreams" in *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, the first detailed and authentic application of psychoanalysis to poetry by a literary man.
John Dewey had stated substantially the same thing as his doctrine of the "continuity" of experience as early as his *Studies in Logical Theory* in 1903, and Aristotle had clearly operated on that assumption, but this time it was supported by the tremendous prestige of Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, published the year before, it carried general conviction, and it bore fruit in a quarter of a century of modern literary criticism.

The battle of course, is not yet won. The past century has seen critic after critic quarrel with every assumption or method of modern criticism, including every type of knowledge that might be brought to bear on literature, and even the basic assumption of continuity. At one end of the scale these attacks are the simple pettishness of James Russell Lowell in a review of Longfellow, mocking the modern critical view that "the form of an author's work is entirely determined by the shape of his skull, and that in turn by the peculiar configuration of his native territory," and Ludwig Lewisohn, in his Preface to Rank's *Art and the Artist*, dismissing all modern criticism since Taine offhand for "leaving Hamlet out of the play." At the other end of the scale they include the reasoned skepticism of Chekhov, writing to Suworin in November 1888, noting the amount of "rubbish" by "blockheads" that scientific criticism, working from irreproachable principles, has produced; or of Anatole France, in a criticism of Brunetière in *La vie littéraire*, proposing the same balance and reservations Sainte-Beuve had earlier proposed:

As a matter of pure theory a critical method is conceivable which, proceeding from science, might share the latter's certainty. . . . All things in the universe are inextricably intertwined. In reality, however, the links of the chain are, in any given spot, so jumbled that the devil himself could not disentangle them, even if he were a logician. . . . One cannot foresee today, whatever one may say, a time when criticism will have the rigorosity of a positive science. One may even believe, reasonably enough, that that time will never come. Nevertheless the great philosophers of antiquity crowned their cosmic systems with a poetics. And they did wisely. For it is better to speak of beautiful thoughts and forms with incertitude than to be forever silent. Few things in the world are so absolutely subject to science that they will let science reproduce or predict them. And one may be sure that a poem or a poet will never be among those few. . . . If these things sustain a relation to science, it is to one that is blended with art, that is intuitive, restless, forever unfinished. That science or, rather, that art exists. It is philosophy, ethics, history, criticism—in a word, the whole beautiful romance of man.
A number of critics have found themselves sharply split on the matter. Thus John Middleton Murry, in *The Problem of Style*, attacks "the fantastic dream" that criticism "might be reduced to the firm precision of a science," and "the vain hope" of giving its language "a constant and invariable significance," but later in the same book proposes an equally scientific (or mechanistic) social and economic criticism, including a one-to-one correlation between economic and social conditions and artistic and literary forms, and even *An Economic History of English Literature*. Allen Tate, an outstanding product of the assumptions of modern criticism and practicer of its methods, in *Reason in Madness*, attacks the social sciences as the fundamental menace, as well as modern criticism itself, which he calls "the historical method," and in which he lumps, along with history, the use of the physical, biological, social, and political sciences in criticism. Similarly, John Crowe Ransom has at one time or another attacked the use of science in criticism, been violently opposed to social sciences like anthropology, and announced that he does not share Max Eastman's "sanguine expectations" for psychology, while himself drawing brilliantly on all three in his own criticism.

Probably more damaging to modern criticism than the attacks by good men and the ambivalence in some of its practitioners has been its enthusiastic defense by men whose own practice ranges from weak to execrable. Thus Louis MacNeice, in *Modern Poetry*, announces a watered-down form of Richards' continuity doctrine, that poetry is a normal activity, the poet being "a specialist in something which everyone practices," but then fails to follow up that assumption in the book by turning any knowledge whatsoever on poetry. It would be hard to find two more violent enthusiasts for scientific criticism in recent times than Max Eastman, writing a manifesto in *The Literary Mind* for "a department of science which will have literature as its object of study," and V. F. Calverton, in *The New Ground of Criticism*, eloquently advocating a criticism that will synthesize psychology, sociology and anthropology — and it would be equally hard to find two worse or more infuriating critics in our time. A comparable mistrust is inspired by Henri Peyre. He makes the very shrewd statement in *Writers and Their Critics*:

Modern criticism is still groping for its method and enthusiastically experimenting with several techniques. It has not yet outgrown the primitive stage in which physics similarly fumbled before Bacon and Descartes,
chemistry before Lavoisier, sociology before Auguste Comte, and physiology before Claude Bernard.

Then in the book Peyre reserves his sharpest attack for precisely those methods — of social, psychological, verbal, and other analysis — and precisely those critics — Richards, Empson, Burke and Blackmur — who most clearly represent the attempt of criticism to outgrow the primitive stage he describes.

At the same time, modern criticism has been regularly under attack by the invested enemy, the reviewers and the professional obscurantists. A characteristic illustration of the first, worth quoting for its typicality, is a review by Orville Prescott that appeared in *The New York Times*, March 28, 1945. The book under discussion is Florence Becker Lennon’s study of Lewis Carroll, *Victoria Through the Looking Glass*. Prescott writes:

Miss Lennon has performed prodigies of research, but in spite of her conscientious labors her book is disappointing and tedious. The enchanting magic of the Alice books defies analysis. To seek its source in Freudian probings into Carroll’s complexes and repressions is as fruitless as to attempt to find explanations for a butterfly’s flight or the lightning’s choice of a target. Genius mysteriously exists; and flowers into enduring treasures as inexplicably.

That Carroll lived a blameless bachelor life is true; but then some men are bachelors from choice and quite content with their lot, in spite of Miss Lennon’s Freudian suspicions. That Carroll likes the company of little girls better than that of boys or adults is also true, and rather odd of him. But all Miss Lennon’s solemn pryings into his psyche, into the sexual symbols of his books, just don’t seem to get anywhere.

... But Lewis Carroll, to whom “hardly anything ever happened,” led a singularly blank life. . . .

But Lewis Carroll led a life without exterior conflict of any kind, and with few inner ones (just vague religious hesitations). He knew neither love nor close friendships. He was a good man and a good Christian. He tried to get his own salary reduced and he insisted on a publishing contract that insured that he himself would bear any possible loss. But his life was dull and colorless. . . .

As these quotations should make clear, in the course of attacking Miss Lennon’s psychoanalytic study, Prescott gives all the reasons why a psychoanalytic study seems very much to the point, and in the course of insisting that Carroll’s life was uneventful, fills it full of the most remarkable events. Like many contemporary reviewers, Prescott attacks
modern criticism seemingly not so much out of malice as out of simple ignorance. In other cases, such as J. Donald Adams' weekly column in *The Sunday Times* and his book *The Shape of Books to Come*, malice and a kind of shrill venom are added, and the picture clearly is of the happily superficial reviewer, fighting to preserve his status and investment in what he thinks is criticism against a mob of sans-culottes.

The attack by the professional obscurantists is a more complicated matter. Perhaps the best example is Mark Van Doren, whose approach to criticism, consistent with his St. John's College approach to education, is opposed to the inroads of any modern knowledge whatsoever. In the Preface to *The Private Reader*, Van Doren has written the most complete and eloquent attack on modern criticism with which I am familiar. He describes it as "deserts of ingenuity and plateaus of learning," reproaches it with "doing all it can to arrest the lyric in its flight," concludes that "it is at best a faulty science . . . not an art." To it Van Doren opposes a pure obscurantism: "Arnold was wrong in the emphasis he placed upon ideas"; "We do not know that much about poetry, and we never shall"; "undiscussable," "the mystery," etc. The piece is remarkable for its tone of bitter elegy, beginning on a theme of exile ("contemporary criticism, a house in which I no longer feel at home"), rising to a wail of keening ("Our literary age is sick"), and ending on the imagery of self-extinction ("My only ambition as a critic is henceforth to be one of those nameless strangers with whom writers dream that they communicate. Poetry itself can do with silence for a while.") The final comment on Van Doren's slogan of "private reading," the bringing of nothing to bear on literature but the reader's attention, was made accidentally by I. A. Richards. He writes in *Interpretation in Teaching*:

The remedy, I suppose, is growth, which will occur if testing occasions enough force the adolescent survivals of the child's dream-world habit to withdraw into their proper place. Unluckily, private reading - when it is only a partially controlled form of dreaming - is a protection from such tests. It too often becomes a romantic preserve for mental processes which are relatively extinct in fully waking life.

Contemporary with modern criticism, along with embattled reviewers and obscurantists, are the violently controversial schools of aesthetic and philosophic doctrine that have enlivened the literary magazines in the past: Impressionists and Expressionists, Neo-Humanists
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and Naturalists, Classicists and Romanticists, Positivists and anti-Positivists, etc. Their current successor seems to be the largely pointless quarrel between the neo-Aristotelians and the neo-Platonists or neo-Coleridgeans. All of these schools and controversies have their function, but it tends to be one of debating large generalities and saying little so far as actual method is concerned. In one way or another, they are all contemporary blind alleys for the man really concerned with the analysis of literature. While the bricks are flying overhead, the serious modern critic will tend to be down in the mine, digging away. He gets his hands dirtier, but he may also turn up a nugget now and then.

IN THE WOODS NEAR CABIN JOHN

Behind my back the way is lost in green,
And I think here is a peace beyond destruction,
For no man aims from any coign my death.
But this peace is subtle before the eye:
A glance will shatter it if sharp enough.
I look where the blight eats silently the leaf
To lacy death, and silently the thrush
Soars for the fly; the tendrils of the creeper,
Tightening, crush the host, and the spider, still
At his ancient station, waits between two trees.
Stumbling in the undergrowth, I pitch and fall,
Tearing my hand upon a thorn. It bleeds,
And I remember suddenly in my blood
The motes warring for the mastery of me.

ERNEST KROLL